

OKEFENOKEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

BIOLOGICAL REPORT

JANUARY - JUNE
1968

I. WILDLIFE POPULATION

Regular bi-weekly counts of waterfowl and wading birds were made on the prescribed inventory routes from Camp Cornelia boat dock to Buzzard Roost and Gannet Lakes, and from the Jones Island boat dock to Big Water Lake through March. Counts were made monthly thereafter throughout the reporting period.

Water levels dropped from late February through early June and Chesser and Grand Prairies were practically dry. Boat traffic became difficult even in Suwannee Canal.

A. Wading Birds

Common Egrets These birds were common throughout the winter but the population did not increase to the level experienced during the last year. A peak population of 4,000 was present during April. Chesser and Grand Prairies were dry by mid-May and most of the egrets had shifted to the west side of the refuge. The Chesser Prairie Rookery was abandoned and a large rookery above the Suwannee River Sill contains most of the wading birds now.

Snowy Egrets Snowy egrets arrived at Okefenokee on March 14. As usual they were uncommon in the interior of the swamp. More snowys were seen along roadside ditches and borrow pits than in the swamp.

Cattle Egrets Cattle egrets arrived on the same day as the snowy egrets. They were more abundant in Chesser and Grand Prairies where there were large areas of exposed peat. They also frequent the Suwannee River Sill which is covered with a heavy grass sod. The refuge population in early June was estimated at 1000 birds.

Great Blue Herons These large birds are seen regularly but are well dispersed over the refuge. The peak population in May was estimated at 400 birds.

Green Herons Green herons are common along Suwannee Canal and they have re-occupied the Chesser Prairie rookery although the other birds have left. The peak population in

May was estimated at 800 individuals.

Louisiana Herons Some Louisiana herons stayed at Okefenokee all winter. The peak population for this period was estimated at 100 individuals.

White Ibis White ibises stayed all winter and the peak population of 10,000 occurred during March and April. Their numbers declined thereafter as the water levels dropped.

Wood Ibises Two wood ibises were seen on March 14. An estimated 100 were present during May.

Sandhill Cranes The wintering population of cranes was up slightly this year. A peak population of 1000 ~~were~~^{was} present during January and February. One observation at Big Water Lake was of 76 cranes in the air at one time. The breeding population was estimated at 220 individuals during April and May. The following counts were made in Chesser and Grand Prairies for the years 1960 through 1968.

	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968
Early January	39	10	76	--	--	--	14	6	41
Late January	24	8	66	--	43	--	12	6	38
Early February	19	4	110	--	18	8	10	7	37
Late February	7	--	--	--	13	8	7	7	15
Early March	6	19	84	--	41	7	15	7	20
Late March	2	2	10	--	--	2	12	8	15
Early April	2	0	--	--	--	--	7	11	11
Late April	5	--	26	--	--	--	10	--	--

Anhingas Anhingas remain common along the boat trails and at several of the lakes. The peak population in January was 240 birds.

Bald Eagles None were observed during this period.

Golden Eagles None were observed during this period.

Ospreys The first nesting activity by ospreys was noted on January 31. All of the known nests were re-occupied this year and one new nest was built at Big Water Lake.

Swallow-tailed Kites. The first observation of these graceful fliers was made on April 2. Only three have been accounted for this year whereas six were believed to have occupied the refuge during the past two summers.

Miscellaneous Birds. Black-crowned night herons were common during the colder months of the year. Yellow-crowned night herons were common throughout the spring months. Usually only an occasional yellow-crowned night heron is seen

at Okefenokee but the May population was estimated at 180 birds. King rail were common during the spring months and several with broods were observed during April and May. The low water conditions that left large areas of exposed peat were undoubtedly responsible for king rails using the interior of the swamp as a breeding area. During years of normal water conditions only and occasional king rail is seen and usually outside the swamp.

B. Waterfowl

1. Populations The peak wintering population occurred in late November and early December 1967. This was the same period the peak occurred during 1966. The peak population of 7,050 ducks consisted of 3,200 wood ducks, 3,000 mallards, 700 black ducks, 100 American widgeon, and 50 hooded mergansers. Peak populations for fiscal years 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, and 1968 were 29,320; 19,998; 10,040; 5,950; and 7,050 respectively. The wood duck breeding population is estimated at 1,000 individuals.

Coots were almost non-existent at Okefenokee this year. A peak population of 100 for this period was in sharp contrast to the previous winter when the coot population was unusually high.

2. Food Conditions Water levels during this period continued to drop until early June. Feeding conditions were favorable during the winter and early spring but by May the prairies were practically dry. This restricted the feeding areas for resident wood ducks to the open lakes, water courses, and Chase Prairie which retained sufficient water.

3. Wood Duck Nesting Boxes Alluminum sheet metal acquired from military surplus was used to make predator shields for wood ducksboxes. All of the nest boxes were checked during January and made ready for the nesting season. Those mounted on cypress trees were removed and installed on treated posts, each with a predator shield. All wood duck boxes at Okefenokee now are mounted on treated posts and all have predator shields.

Cypress lumber procured during the last period is being used to construct new boxes. These will be erected in new areas of the swamp where no boxes have been available to wood ducks before.

The nest boxes have not been checked as of this writing (June 7) to determine the amount of use for this period.

4. Waterfowl Trapping and Banding Determined effort and a lot of overtime by Biological Technicians, Jewett V. Hall, William C. Cone and Omer L. Bowen resulted in the past banding season being a booming success. Almost nine times as many ducks were banded at Okefenokee then have ever been banded during any other season. From November 26 through

March 4, 638 ducks were trapped, banded and released. This consisted of 405 wood ducks, 79 mallards, 6 black ducks, 2 lesser scaups, 74 ring-necked ducks, 71 green-winged teak, and 1 pintail. Monthly totals were November 18, December 88, January 239, February 261 and March 35.

- C. Turkeys Adult turkeys were observed near Camp Cornelia on January 18, May 11 and 2, and on Cow House Island on May 8. It is hoped that the planned changes in timber management practices will be beneficial to turkeys.
- D. Bears One bear was seen near Boone Lake on February 20. Several tracks have been seen around the swamp perimeter and it is believed that the population is holding its own.
- E. Deer Deer are still common in the swamp as well as on perimeter uplands. Abundant deer sign was observed at the north end of Big Water Lake while the water levels were low. At least seven deer were lost to poachers in the Pocket during late December and early January.
- F. Raccoons Raccoons are common almost everywhere on perimeter lands and in the interior of the swamp. Nine raccoons were disposed of at our duck trapping sites during this period.
- G. Otters Otter were common during the colder months but as usual they are rarely seen after the weather becomes warmer. One otter was shipped to Wheeler Refuge on February 23.
- H. Fishing Fishing success was high in March and April but declined as water levels receded. Boat travel became difficult and fishing pressure declined with the drop in water levels.
- I. Alligators The low water condition has concentrated alligators and they are now numerous in all deep water areas. Billy's Lake has been referred to by some local fishermen as "Gator Town". Five alligators drowned on hooks set by a poacher who was unable to retrieve them before Biological Technicians Jewett V. Hall and William C. Cone caught on to his game. A sixth alligator was released alive.

One 10 foot 10 inch specimen was removed from Billy's Lake to be used in our interpretive display at Camp Cornelia. These are the only alligators known to be lost this period.

II. WEED CONTROL

Maidencane along the Suwannee Canal and the Suwannee River Sill Borrow Pit was sprayed on May 20, 21 and 22. The water level was too low to get a boat through Canal Run and this proposed project was not completed.

The Suwannee River Sill (dike) was infested with increasing growth of wax myrtle and buttonbush. The sill was mowed with a rotary mower on May 29 and 31. The sill is now in excellent shape. Repeated mowing is expected to prevent the encroachment of woody species and help maintain the grass sod.

The City of Homerville has agreed to spray the infestation of water hyacinth in that city. This will be checked to ensure control measures have been applied by the city.

III. ECOLOGICAL SUCCESSION FOLLOWING FLOODING BY THE SUWANNEE RIVER SILL

No transects were due to be checked during this period.

IV. PLANT SUCCESSION ON PRAIRIE BATTERIES

Both battery transects were checked during the last period. These will be due again during late summer of 1969.

V. ECOLOGICAL SUCCESSION FOLLOWING THE 1954-55 FIRES

No transects were due to be checked during this period.

VI. SPECIAL ASSIGNMENT

Twelve sandhill crane nests were located during late April and early May for the Rare and Endangered Species Programs. A representative from Patuxent Research Center collected 10 eggs for their propagation study.

VII. PUBLIC RELATIONS

On January 18 two photographers from the Jacksonville Times Union were given a tour of the east side. They took pictures and gathered material for a feature story on the Okefenokee NWR.

On February 27, Mr. Brian Carter, Director, Department of Natural Resources, New Brunswick, Canada was given a tour of the east side.

On February 28 and March 4 a prepared talk on the U.S. Department of the Interior was presented to two separate classes of students at Ware County High School.

On April 1 a movie was shown to the Okefenokee Bird Club with 15 members present.

On April 17 Professor E.W. Mogren and 21 forestry students were given a tour of the west side and the history and ecology of Okefenokee was explained to the group.

On May 3 a group of forestry students from the University of Georgia and Professor Steve Lamphier were given a tour of the east side of the refuge.

On May 4 a group of students from Agnes Scott College were given a tour of the west side of the refuge.

On May 24 Mr. Roger Tippy, Izaak Walton League of America, was given a tour of the Suwannee River Sill area.

On June 5 two safety meetings were conducted for the Georgia Power Company in Waycross and Jesup.

Leonard O. Walker
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Wildlife Biologist

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